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590: Local Notes -- Confessions of a Reluctant Advocate

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Why any Sensible Notion of Financial Sustainability Means Libraries Should Refuse Federal Dollars. Or Stop the Flow of Federal Library Bucks: It ain't Sustainable

You had to love the December 2010-January 2011 issue of *Against the Grain*. It took on the enormously relevant and sometimes troubling issue of library sustainability. An array of articles suggested that libraries go green, curtail their electrical use, reorganize their buildings, and jettison their dependence on oil. None of the authors got to the point of urging libraries to recycle their roof rainwater runoff or to compost their break room leftovers, but even if they had, who would have objected? We all need green and sustainable libraries.

Nevertheless, something was missing. Call it a serious omission, if you like, or a troubling lacunae. No one talked about the nation's increasing government indebtedness and the part that libraries play in that totally unsustainable financial boondoggle. In particular, the issue lacked any discussion of the wisdom of library advocacy at the federal level — that unflinching addiction to federal library spending or specifically how that addiction relates to the notion of sustainability. In short, we needed a frank and open discussion about the extremely questionable tendency of libraries to clamor for and go after every single federal dollar they can — a practice that is from a financial perspective (shall we come right out and say it?) anything but sustainable.

Now, don't get me wrong. Advocacy at the federal level has its merits. Even on the basic of pragmatics, one could argue that libraries need to fight for every single federal dollar they can get — just like every other special interest group, just like every other lobby. If we do not stand up for libraries, if we are not out there contacting our representatives on behalf of libraries, then who will?

Nor I am not about to deny that we may have one of the best cases for robust federal outlays. Moreover, the results of such funding have to be more beneficial and more enlightened than your run-of-the-mill special interest group. We're not out there trying to underwrite trial lawyers, predatory lenders, or the industrial military complex. On the contrary, we are after funds for wonderful beneficial entities — libraries — public private and academic. That libraries offer an unquestionable general public good is beyond question. That they benefit the body politic, and they do it in a decidedly democratic way — serving Americans regardless of race, color, class, and creed — none can deny.

Moreover, (and here is a point that has to be born in mind) when we begin to talk about spending for

libraries, when we begin to insist that library programs retain existing levels of federal funding, we are not talking about a lot of money. On the contrary, the actual money in terms of the overall federal budget some might consider negligible. Reflect on the recent urging from the **American Library Association** that librarians contact their representatives and senators on Continuing Resolution 2011. The resolution would maintain 2010 funding level of \$213.5 million for the **Library Services and Technology Act** and it would hold to the 2010 funding level of \$19.1 million for the Improving Literacy through School Libraries program. Now, if the **American Library Association** were able to gain this kind of support from the Federal government, the actual percentage of the Federal Budget for such an outlay would be statistically insufficient.

Now as good as all of these arguments may seem to us as librarians and defenders of libraries, they fall short when it comes to the notion of sustainability or any enlightened understanding of the term. **Karen Christensen** of **Berkshire Publishing** and guest editor of the December 2010-January 2011 *ATG* issue, defines environmental sustainability as “using resources and interacting with the natural world in ways that will reduce what is available to future generations.”¹ When we consider this definition of sustainability, it becomes obvious that the Federal government is in the process of exploiting its financial resources to a remarkable degree — that the government is, in a sense, willfully reducing the financial resources of future generations. The practice is clearly unsustainable.

Consider the figures. The federal Government Deficit (what it spends in excess of what it takes in) equals about 8.9 percent of the country's GDP (Gross Domestic Product).² Moreover, the nation's public debt runs in excess of 14 trillion dollars, a figure that grows at an average rate of 4.5 billion per day.³

To give you a sense of that debt's size, remember that **President Obama** in February asked **Congress** for a proposed budget for the 2012 fiscal year of \$3.7 trillion in spending for the fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1, 2011. The budget came with a projected deficit of \$1.1 trillion.⁴ That means that the country's current debt will exceed by nearly a factor of four next year's governmental outlay. That is like having a credit card debt four times the size of your annual income — not an appealing thought by any standard.

Now you may counter that all of these figures have little to do

with libraries — which may seek and even depend on federal funding, for in the grand scheme of things, we are not really asking for much. But need I remind you that that kind of mindset has been the very kind of thinking that has undermined the environmental movement? For libraries to continue to grovel for the federal funding, arguing that it isn't really that much money, is similar to the soccer mom who buys the biggest SUV gas guzzler she can, or the small businessman who incessantly pollutes the environment, because on any sense of scale what one soccer mom or one small businessman does, doesn't real make all that much difference.

No, a sense of sustainability demands that small actions can have important rippling effects. If we as librarians are going after every conceivable federal dollar we can, all the while knowing that the nation lacks the tax revenue to cover such expenses, that in a sense the government has to borrow the cash to cover its library budgets without any means or plans to pay it back — then we are irresponsible. We are also pursuing actions that counter and oppose any sort of fiscal sustainability. We are unwittingly (or wittingly, for that matter) abusing the financial and fiscal environment of our nation, just as we may have in the past unwittingly and foolishly polluted the physical environment.

No, it is time for those of us in the library world to put our own house in order. We must ask our professional organizations to begin to say no to federal dollars and to begin to seek other avenues for support. We have to think in terms of financial sustainability as a nation and what we as a profession can do about it. On a financial level — in much the same way, we approach other areas of sustainability — we must start now to think globally and to act locally. 🌱

Endnotes

1. **Karen Christensen**, “Sustainability in Collection Development: Seeing the Forest for the Trees,” *Against the Grain*, v.22#6 (December 2010 – January 2011), p6.
2. Figures from *usgovernmentspending.com* at http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/federal_deficit_chart.html (March 1, 2011).
3. Figures gleaned from the U.S. Treasury Department's site, <http://www.treasurydirect.gov/NP/BPD/Login?application=np> (March 1, 2011).
4. *NY Times*, Updated February 28, 2011: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/f/federal_budget_us/index.html.

